*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Cold-weather memories fact checked**

Relying solely on memory as my teeth become longer can sometimes result in the details being a little fuzzy — even when it seems like yesterday.

I tried to hone my photographic and eidetic memory skills through years as a journalist — details, names and places are important. My wife will say that my memory is more idiotic than eidetic; I can remember who sang a pop song from the 1970s but can’t remember something she told me five minutes ago.

Recently, [I wrote a column remembering a bitterly-cold Sunday morning](https://www.wnanews.com/2020/02/12/cold-shoulder-cheap-thermometer/) “some 45 years ago” when my grandmother proclaimed during the church announcements that she had 44-below at her house in Franklin — the coldest spot in the area.

That story prompted a letter from reader Eli Borntreger of Kendall, who vouched that Franklin in Jackson County is a cold spot. Borntreger said on Jan. 31, 2019, he attended a wedding between Melrose and Franklin — the day during the polar vortex when my thermometer bottomed out at -40.

“En route there as we passed through Sparta and Melrose we noticed the temperature to be quite cold, in the 36- to 39-below range,” he wrote. “When we arrived at the place of the wedding a fellow showed up from the vicinity of Franklin and said his thermometer showed 50-below and that is as far as his thermometer can go. Another of his neighbors showed up and said his thermometer showed 52-below!”

Borntreger’s letter continued, referencing my mention of that cold Sunday in church.

“I was not yet in Wisconsin 45 years ago, but when I first read your mention of a cold Sunday some 45 years ago, I thought at first you may be referring to January 1982 when there were several very cold and blustery consecutive weekends — Sunday, Jan. 10, being the most memorable to me.

“It was both very cold and very windy at the same time. Upon coming home from church services of about a 50% attendance, our buggy became stalled in a wind-packed snowdrift close to a half-mile from home.

“We ended up unhitching the team and ran the remainder of the way home. We sustained a good bit of frostbite by the time we reached home. I still remember how good it seemed to lie down close to our woodstove in our old farmhouse after chores were done later that evening.”

I knew I hadn’t confused my cold winters because Grandma died in 1979. But I also remembered that cold January in 1982; I was a senior in high school. We had a wrestling tournament in Whitehall on a Saturday that hit -40 with wind chills in the -70 range. By the time we made our way home, the wood stove in the house had gone out and it was cold in the house, too.

The cold day Borntreger remembers, Jan. 10, the low in nearby Sparta was -26. It was a bitterly cold month with 16 days of below-zero temperatures, including -40 on Jan. 16 and -31 on Jan. 17. The average temperature that month was 4.3 degrees, 12 degrees less than average. It’s tied for the fourth-coldest January in La Crosse weather records.

But it wasn’t as cold as January 1977, when there were only four days the entire month that remained at more than zero according to weather records from Blair — only 10 miles from our farm. The average temperature was 2.9 degrees, the third-coldest January on record.

There were 13 days colder than -20 and five colder than -30. There was a bone-chilling -40 on Jan. 9, 1977, which just so happens to be a Sunday. By all accounts that must be the day when Grandma said it was 44-below in Franklin.

So it’s been 43 years — not 45. I was close; it seems like yesterday.

Back in 1982, Borntreger said his dad and brother recovered the buggy the next day.

“By that time the snow was all blown out from under the buggy and it was standing there on solid pavement,” he said.

But it may have been even colder elsewhere, he said.

“Afterward I heard say of a fellow of Minnesota that got so cold while doing chores that he ended up checking to see whether he had his pants on,” he said. “Possibly the wind was even stronger there.”

Now that’s cold.

C*hris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*

022020-agrv-life-hardie-1: Keeping water flowing in the cold is a challenge.

022020-agrv-life-hardie-2: The February “super moon,” called the “Snow Moon,” is aptly named; western Wisconsin receives 8 to 10 inches.

022020-agrv-life-hardie-3: The remains of a building and silo fade into the woods in rural Jackson County, Wisconsin.

022020-agrv-life-hardie-4: Frozen fog softens the landscape of a bright and frigid winter morning.

022020-agrv-life-hardie-5: The Mindoro Cut near Mindoro, Wisconsin, is frosted over.